

Report to Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee

To: Chair and Members
Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee

From: Scott Mathers, MPA, P. Eng
Deputy City Manager, Planning and Economic Development

Subject: Core Area Ambassador Pilot Program Review

Date: October 10, 2023

Recommendation

That, on the recommendation of the Deputy City Manager, Planning and Economic Development, the following actions be taken with respect to a proposed strategy for the Core Area in alignment with the 2023-2027 City of London Strategic Plan:

- a) The staff report dated October 10, 2023, entitled “Core Area Ambassador Pilot Program Review” **BE RECEIVED**; and
- b) Core Area Ambassador Pilot Program **BE CONCLUDED** at the end of 2023.

Executive Summary

The Core Area Ambassador Program was approved through the Core Area Action Plan (CAAP) as a 4-year pilot at the start of the current multi-year budget, with goals centred around making the Core Area more welcoming.

The intent was to undertake a program review based on a 4-year pilot, but the program launch was delayed due to the COVID-19 lockdown measures, impacting the duration of the pilot. The program review is based on a year of full operations that began in 2022.

A comprehensive community engagement began in April 2023 to assess the impact, benefits, and perceptions of the Ambassador Program. Key findings were that:

- 74% of survey respondents were aware of the Ambassador Program.
- 89% of business owners and operators in the Core Area who have interacted directly with the Ambassadors indicated that they see value in the program continuing to support the Core Area.
- 90% of those who visit the Core Area (but do not live or work there), who have interacted directly with the Ambassadors indicated that they see value in the program continuing to support the Core Area.
- 65% of survey respondents think the program should continue.

Given the changing needs of the Core Area and the significant budget pressures on the 2024-2027 multi-year budget process, it is recommended that the Core Area Ambassador program be concluded at the end of 2023. A report on proposed Core Area programs moving forward will be brought forward in November as a companion report to Council's 2023 to 2027 Strategic Plan Implementation Plan.

Linkage to the Corporate Strategic Plan

This report describes work of the Core Area Ambassador role that advances Council's 2023 to 2027 Strategic Plan by supporting the following Strategic Area(s) of Focus and Expected Results:

Wellbeing and Safety

- Londoners feel safe across the city, in the core, in their neighbourhoods, and communities.
- Londoners have safe access to public spaces, services and supports that increase wellbeing and quality of life.

Economic Growth, Culture and Prosperity

- Small and growing businesses, entrepreneurs, and non-profits are supported to be successful.
- Increased and diversified economic activity from London's Core Area
- More activities and events in the Core Area, offering diverse and inclusive experiences.
- Increased safety in the Core Area.

Safe London for Women, Girls, Gender-Diverse, and Trans people

- London is a safe city where women, girls, nonbinary and trans individuals, and survivors access public spaces and freely participate in public life without fear or experience of sexual violence.

Analysis

1.0 Background Information

1.1 Previous Reports Related to this Matter

- June 20, 2023 - Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee – Core Area Action Plan 2022 Review
- June 7, 2022 - Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee – Core Area Action Plan: 2022 One-Time Program Enhancements
- March 8, 2022 - Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee – Core Area Action Plan 2021 Review
- November 30, 2021 - Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee – Strategy to Reduce Core Area Vacancy
- May 18, 2021 - Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee – Comprehensive Report on Core Area Initiatives
- July 14, 2020 - Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee - Core Area Action Plan - 2020 Progress Update
- October 28, 2019 - Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee - Core Area Action Plan
- November 20, 2017 - Planning and Environment committee – Dundas Place Management and Dundas Place Fieldhouse

1.2 Core Area Ambassador Pilot Program – Core Area Action Plan

The Core Area Ambassador Pilot Program was developed to implement Action #25 in the Core Area Action Plan: Create a 4-year Ambassador pilot program.

This program will establish Core Area Ambassadors who will wear uniforms, making them easily identifiable as people who can provide assistance. They will walk throughout the Core Area, surveying a regular beat, offering information, assistance, and a welcoming perspective. They will be trained to understand and address many issues that occur in the Core Area. They will identify issues that they encounter and connect with the Coordinated Informed Response team to get people the help and care they need. They will be able to identify garbage issues, by-law infractions, and the need for clean-ups within the Core Area. They will engage and advise the police as appropriate. Ambassadors will clean up litter. They will work to prevent the damage and theft of movable street furniture (such as bistro tables and chairs) set out to activate public spaces. The Ambassadors will seek to develop strong relationships with property owners, business owners, residents, and regular patrons of the Core Area.

There may be opportunity to partner with a non-profit group or organization to operate this program, with the added goals of providing employment and

providing work experience and training to help unemployed Londoners gain future employment outside of the program. This opportunity needs to be explored further.

To be effective, Ambassadors will be present in the Core Area from 7am until 11pm, seven days per week, to address the issues that occur in the mornings, evenings, and on weekends, as well as the core daytime hours. The program would be put in place for four years, after which it could be continued if found to be effective, or discontinued if it is not meeting its intended goals.

The City of London initiated the Core Area Ambassador program to foster a welcoming and safe environment, contribute to the vibrancy of the Core, and support existing programs and services in the Core Area. “Core Area Ambassadors” are the friendly faces regularly circulating through the Core Area, who help visitors with directions, let people know what events are happening, assist with parking questions and respond to business inquiries. The Core Area Ambassador Program was approved as a 4-year pilot. The program launch was delayed 2-years due to COVID-19 and lockdown measures and only operated since the end of 2021.

The program operates the equivalent of 3 shifts per week with overall program hours at its peak of up to 112 hours per week. Typically, a minimum of 2 staff are on duty at any given time and travel in pairs for a variety of reasons, including safety.

The Ambassadors have responsibilities and job duties that align with directions in the former and current City Strategic Plans. The Ambassador’s current core function is largely hospitality and customer-service driven. In contributing to the aim of maintaining a comfortable Core Area experience, Ambassadors are friendly faces welcoming residents and visitors, maintaining connections with business operators, providing recommendations, assisting with concerns, and addressing issues within their purviews or identifying and navigating issues to appropriate City teams for resolution.

During the pilot phase, Ambassador walks comprise the largest portion of an Ambassador’s workday. An Ambassador walk can be described as a physical deployment to a geographic area for a specific time or distance. During this deployment, Ambassadors fulfill their main duties of greeting any individuals they come across, engaging with any problems that may arise to the best of their ability, and recording visual and verbal concerns they encounter (complaints, vandalism, etc.).

2.0 Discussion and Considerations

2.1 Core Area Ambassador Pilot Program Goals and Current Functions

The Core Area Ambassador program goal of CAAP #25 is summarized as, “The Ambassadors will seek to develop strong relationships with property owners, business owners, residents and regular patrons of the Core Area.” Building on the expectations above and operating within its current structure, the program goal has evolved in practice to:

- Foster a welcoming and safe environment; and
- Contribute to the vibrancy of the Core Area; and
- Support and promote existing programs and services in the Core Area.

Foster a Welcoming and Safe Environment

Core Area Ambassadors strive to create a welcoming and safe environment when walking throughout the Core Area. They regularly interact with residents, tourists, visitors, business owners and workers who frequent the Core Area on a regular basis. In 2022, Ambassadors logged over 7,000 recognized interactions with members of the public. These interactions are defined as a simple conversation resulting in a compliment, complaint, advice, or referral, and encompass more complex interactions to

help problem-solve issues in the Core Area. Ambassadors also performed 753 wellness checks on those living unhoused in the Core Area and encountered 29 overdoses that Ambassadors voluntarily intervened in to directly administer First-Aid and Naloxone.

Contribute to the Vibrancy of the Core Area

One of the duties envisioned in the Core Area Ambassador program, though not explicitly listed in the job description, are efforts by Ambassadors to help maintain high housekeeping standards the Core Area. Ambassadors logged over 7,215 instances of picking up litter and trash around the Core Area and helped safely remove 813 collections of sharps and needles. They also reported 401 large collections of uncollectible material that had been left curbside (e.g., furniture items, renovation material, fridges, etc.) to be removed in an effort to clean up the streetscape.

Support and Promote Existing Programs and Services in the Core Area

Core Area Ambassadors have been present at special and regular scheduled events and activations that occur throughout the Core Area, connecting and speaking with participants and organizers, and ensuring event spaces are welcoming. Informed on what is happening in the Core Area, Ambassadors assisted with over 250 events and activations through 2022. For the spring and summer season of 2023, Ambassadors led the facilitation of new Dundas Place activations, including 'Games in the Lane', 'Street Curling on Dundas Place', and 'Core Area Walking Group'. The activations were well received and generated additional interactions and opportunities to engage with the public, while simultaneously activating Dundas Place and the wider Core Area. As more major events and conventions returned in 2023 to the Core Area, the Ambassadors were deployed to assist with programs offered in London, such as visitors and guests of the Tim Horton's Brier and Association of Municipalities of Ontario convention.

Core Area Ambassadors also regularly interact with several existing programs and services offered both internally and externally. During the review period, Ambassadors referred 796 calls for service to internal City teams to address problems observed by them. These can include scenarios like bylaw infractions, graffiti, vandalism, right-of-way concerns, and roadway and walkway hazards. Ambassadors have also assisted partners in the social services sector with 168 by-request referrals for unhoused Londoners, and 108 non-emergency calls to London Police Service.

Further details regarding the Ambassadors' role in logged tasks are contained Appendix 'A'.

2.2 Program Evaluation Engagement

With program funding tied to the City's multi-year budget, a program evaluation began earlier in 2023 with public engagement to hear from businesses, residents, and visitors on their experiences and perceptions of the program based on just over a year of operations. Central to the program review was engagement with Core Area businesses, residents, and visitors through an online survey.

External engagement for the Core Area Ambassador pilot program review began on April 3, 2023, and concluded on April 28, 2023 (25 days). There were 319 total respondents to both the online survey and the in-person engagement. The survey was designed to be a quick and accessible way to engage Londoners on their experience with the Core Area Ambassador pilot program.

Demographics

- 124 respondents -- "I work in the Core Area."
- 60 respondents -- "I own and operate a business in the Core Area."
- 55 respondents -- "I live and work in the Core Area."
- 52 respondents -- "I visit the Core Area, but do not work or live in it."
- 28 respondents -- "I live in the Core Area."

Engagement & Consultation Highlights

- 78% respondents indicated they have seen or interacted with a Core Area Ambassador.
- Of those who have seen or interacted with the Ambassador program, 81% were somewhat satisfied, or very satisfied with the interaction/resolution.
- Of those business owners aware of the program, and seen and interacted with an Ambassador, 83% were somewhat satisfied or very satisfied with the interaction.
- 63% of all business owners and operators in the Core Area support the Core Area program to continue.
- 71% of those who visit the Core Area (but do not live or work there) see value in the program continuing to support the Core Area.
- 65% of survey respondents think the program should continue.

2.3 Program Evaluation Analysis

The goals of the Core Area Ambassador program were highlighted as number 25 of the Core Area Action Plan and can be summarized as, “The Ambassadors will seek to develop strong relationships with property owners, business owners, residents and regular patrons of the Core Area.” The most significant cost driver for this program is the resident and patron interaction portion of the program. This aspect of the program requires 3 shifts per week with overall program hours at its peak of up to 112 hours per week with two to four staff typically on duty at any given time at a cost of approximately \$550,000 per year.

As outlined in the 2024-2027 Multi-Year Budget submitted to the Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee on April 18, 2023, there are significant budgetary pressures that impact the development of the 2024-2027 Multi-Year Budget. These impacts include significant inflationary pressures, provincial legislative changes, and proposed strategic plan investments. Given the significant costs of maintaining the resident and patron interaction portion of the program, it is recommended that this portion of the program be concluded at the end of 2023.

An alternative that could still maintain supports provided to property owners and business owners that is offered as an aspect of the existing program, would be the creation of a “Core Area Business and Owner Connector” position. This position would focus on connecting with Core Area businesses and owners during regular business hours, without the significant overhead costs of the existing program. This position would be responsible for bringing forward and actioning issues raised by the Core Area businesses and property owners, sharing information on City programs available to support businesses, and help area businesses navigate City approval and regulatory processes.

To maintain strong relationships with residents and regular patrons of the Core Area, it is recommended that the actions included in the Core Area Business Case support ongoing activations within the Core Area to maintain access to regular and exciting events in the core, and a high-level of customer service using existing platforms such as Service London. The Core Area Business Case will include a variety of actions that will provide permanent funding to support property owners, business owners, residents, and regular patrons of the Core Area moving forward.

3.0 Moving Forward

Considering the significant cost to continue the program, return on investment, the need to support other core area actions, and the considerable number of other budgetary pressures, it is recommended that the Core Area Ambassador Pilot Program be concluded. The learnings from this program will inform the development of the Core Area Business Case. The business case will include the role of “Core Area Business and Owner Connector” position. This position will continue the aspects of this program, valued by Core Area businesses, without the staffing requirements of the pilot program.

This new position will be included in the Core Area Business Case submitted as part of the 2024-2028 multi-year budget process deliberations.

Conclusion

The City of London's Core Area Ambassador Pilot Program has experienced many positive outcomes throughout its trial period in 2022 and 2023. As a unique service offered through the Corporation of the City of London, it has demonstrated value in fostering a welcoming and hospitable Core Area experience to residents, visitors, and businesses. Having evaluated the successes and limitations encountered in the pilot phase of the Core Area Ambassador Program, it is recommended that the Ambassador role evolve further with a more pronounced economic focus on supporting the Core Area business environment, while still maintaining the service orientation valued by residents and visitors of the Core Area and to those who participated in the program review engagement.

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Submitted by: Stephen Thompson, MCIP RPP
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Recommended by: Scott Mathers, MPA, P. Eng
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Appendix A – Tasks Log of Ambassador Program Response

The Core Area Ambassador pilot program has worked to respond, where possible, to the dynamic needs of the Core Area by operating through a multidisciplinary role. Ambassadors led the engagement of identifying and resolving 723 issues through collaboration with other City service areas or agencies since the introduction of a new task management system in December 2022. Utilizing this system has allowed the tracking and monitoring of ongoing or repeating concerns that have been reported to Ambassadors.

Tasks logged by Ambassadors (Dec 2022 - Apr 2023)

